

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
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CASS LAKE, MINNESOTA
ON REAUTHORIZATION OF THE HEAD START ACT
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
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***INDIAN HEAD START AND THE NEED FOR RESEARCH AND CULTURALLY
APPROPRIATE CURRICULA***

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Leech Lake Band Head Start program on the reauthorization of the Head Start Act. I will concentrate my comments on Indian Head Start research issues, but would like to note here my full support for the testimony of the National Indian Head Start Directors Association, which addresses Indian Head Start issues in a comprehensive fashion.

My testimony broadly examines the importance of culture values in the Indian educational experience, the status of various Indian Head Start research efforts, the key have been or should be examined as part of a research agenda, and the need to establish curricula that reflect Indian cultural values. While some research has been undertaken, Indian programs have been generally left out of the national research agenda. It is time for this to change; we can only make progress if we understand where we are and what works. I strongly urge the Congress to recognize the value of culture-specific research and curricula and incorporate that recognition into the Head Start Act.

There is a strong consensus that American Indian and Alaska Native children bring unique aspects of their culture and background into Head Start. Based on studies and practitioners' observations, it is likely that many American Indian and Alaska Native children have learning approaches, develop language skills, exhibit behavioral characteristics, and are affected by health matters in ways that are different from those of other racial and ethnic groups. Moreover, American Indian and Alaska Native children differ from each other across tribal and ancestral affiliations and across the cultural norms which affect their families and the types of environments in which they live. **Any research efforts must take into account the unique cultural characteristics of the children and families served as well as the goals and directions of the local communities in which they live.**

To provide appropriate, relevant Head Start services, programs must accommodate the unique characteristics of AI-AN children. Understanding and building on these unique characteristics may be especially timely, given the emphasis currently placed on measuring outcomes that is affecting all Head Start programs.

One particular challenge in describing and assessing early childhood education for American Indian and Alaska Native populations is to recognize their uniqueness while avoiding any overgeneralization about their distinctiveness; if this challenge is not met, the analyst risks stereotyping, with attendant adverse consequences.

American Indian-Alaska Native Head Start programs need to be included in the Head Start Bureau's efforts to improve accountability by strengthening screening and assessment of child outcomes and program monitoring. Such activities, however, must be conducted in a manner that takes into account the unique cultural values of tribes implementing Head Start programs. Although tribal Head Start programs have the same requirements for assessing program outcomes as other Head Start programs, little is known about current practices in assessing children's progress at the program level among tribal Head Start programs. For example, are the instruments, measures, and procedures being used to assess child outcomes in tribal Head Start programs culturally appropriate?

Current national research and evaluation activities of Head Start typically exclude tribal programs from the population eligible for inclusion in the samples, in part because of methodological issues raised by the inclusion of tribal programs, and in part because legislative mandates have specifically excluded tribal programs from certain national Head Start research and evaluation activities (Sec. 649, Head Start Authorization Act, October 27, 1998). At the same time, legislative provisions require the study of Head Start programs for American Indian and Alaska Native children. To meet this requirement, it is necessary to study American Indian-Alaska Native Head Start programs in a separate effort from other national research and evaluation studies of Head Start programs. Cultural issues must be addressed in the development of methodologies, sampling procedures, and data collection instruments for use in conducting research among tribal Head Start programs. Differences among American Indian and Alaska Native groups must be acknowledged and respected in developing the methodology and conducting the research.

Most importantly, tribal communities must have a significant voice in how the research is

designed and conducted. To support the development and implementation of research within and by tribal communities, ACF needs to collect information on the research needs and priorities of tribal Head Start programs. Little is known about the kinds of research studies currently being conducted by tribal Head Start programs, experiences of tribal programs in research partnerships with colleges and universities, and ways that ACF might support these partnerships.

In 2001, the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, began a two-year initiative to review existing information and explore research needs for American Indian-Alaska Native Head Start programs. The goal of the project was to develop research responsive to the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs – research that (1) takes into account the unique cultural environments and values of these populations and (2) provides information that programs can use to improve services provided to children and families.

The project addressed the following questions:

- What are the research priorities and needs of American Indian and Alaska Native programs?
- What issues should be considered in conducting research in American Indian and Alaska Native programs?
- How can ACF support partnerships between researchers and American Indian-Alaska Native Head Start programs?
- To what extent are culturally appropriate instruments, measures, and procedures available to assess child outcomes?
- What technical assistance would be helpful for program staff in terms of conducting developmental screenings and assessing child outcomes?

Findings from the work produced directions for developing scientifically valid information that can be used to address matters of consequence for American Indian-Alaska Native Head Start programs, particularly with regard to identifying effective procedures and practices for enhancing child development and promoting school readiness.

This study, entitled ***American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start: Establishing a Research Agenda***, is finished and at the Head Start Bureau. This report, done under a contract with ORC Macro, Calverton, MD, must be released to the AI-AN community as soon as possible and the findings, reviewed with the National Indian Head Start Directors Association. A “sister” publication entitled ***A Summary of Research and Publications on Early Childhood for American Indian and Alaska Native Children*** was published by the Head Start Bureau in March 2003 and is available at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing_research/hs/hs_aian_report.html.

NIHSDA strongly recommends research in the following priority areas:

- The National Reporting System (NRS) initiative, prior to being implemented in Indian Country, needs to eliminate its culturally biased and irrelevant testing tools. We recommend that NSR be tabled until culturally appropriate tools are developed.
- The current Head Start Act has 2 studies which Congress thought were important in 1998, to date neither of these studies have been reported out to the Indian Community. They are:

“Status of Children – a study of the delivery of Head Start programs to Indian children living on and near Indian reservations, to children of Alaskan Natives, and to children of migrant and seasonal farm workers.” The migrant study has been completed and published however the AI-AN study was never started.

“Facilities – a report concerning the condition, location and ownership of facilities used or available to be used, by Indian Head Start agencies (including Native Alaskan Head Start agencies) and Native Hawaiian Head Start agencies.”

Other research that NIHSDA believes is important is:

- Methods for recruiting and retaining high-quality and trained staff. Today, in AI-AN programs nation wide, the attrition rate for Directors is 30-40% per year and at least that high for management and classroom staff. NIHSDA, the Head Start Bureau and the American Indian-Alaska Native Program Branch need to know how this rate of attrition can be slowed and stopped. This research should also include optimal strategies for staff development in tribal communities.

- After almost 40 years of Head Start operating in Indian Country, Directors and Tribal Leadership would like to know how Head Start has made a difference. There should be a longitudinal study comparing outcomes for AI-AN Head Start participants to those who were not Head Start participants.
- What are AI-AN programs doing right that helps to keep children in school after Head Start and what can we do different to help identify children with the potential of dropping out of school once they leave Head Start. In many Indian communities, the high school drop out rate is 40-50% and in some as high as 80%. What role can Head Start play in recognizing traits in young children before they become a statistic of either a success in school or a dropout?

With this type of research, AI-AN Head Start programs could begin to analyze what changes for the better could be made. Also, it would help government agencies, including the Head Start Bureau, to more realistically focus funds and initiatives on what works for American Indian and Alaska Native children and families, staff and community members.

CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE CURRICULA AND PRACTICES

Issues and Observations

Head Start endorses the use of culturally appropriate curricula and practices to help provide contextual links for children's schoolwork. Many observers and educators have noted the importance of providing culturally appropriate curricula for American Indian and Alaska Native children:

- Including Native language and culture in the curriculum is a way to provide social, historical, and emotional links that aid in children's achievement in school. Developing culturally appropriate curricula should involve a team approach, including students in teacher training programs, local teachers and educational administrators, elders, community members, and university-based staff (Allen, 1997; Ball and Pence, 1999; Jordan, 1995; Rinehart et al., 2002; Watahomigie and McCarty, 1994).
- Schools have an important role in restoring Native languages (Holm and Holm,

1995; Peacock and Day, 1999), although some members of some tribal communities have expressed opposition to teaching components of the culture (especially religious and ceremonial functions) in the schools (Batchelder and Markel, 1997).

- Many authors note that AI-AN children bring their cultural backgrounds into school, and they also note that the way much American education is typically provided may not be fully compatible with the learning styles of AI-AN children. “Native students learn in styles unique to their cultural upbringing . . . [and their] learning styles . . . are directly impacted by language, culture, spirituality, communication styles, and more” (Tunley-Daymude and Begay-Campbell, 2000). Some curriculum developers have postulated that underachievement, absenteeism, high dropout rates, and lack of parental involvement are linked to inconsistencies between cultural values of AI-AN children and traditional school curricula (Joe, 1994; Stokes, 1997).
- Teaching styles and classroom instructional practices need to reflect the learning styles of AI-AN children, who are likely to demonstrate more engagement in classroom instruction and activities when the teaching style and instructional practices fit their cultural backgrounds (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997; Estrin and Nelson-Barber, 1995; Swisher and Deyhle, 1987; Tharp, 1994; Tharp and Yamauchi, 1994). A preference for an “observational” or visual learning approach has been described among several AI-AN populations, including the Eskimo, Kwakwaka'wakw, Navajo, Oglala Sioux, Pueblo, Yaqui, and Yup'ik (Deyhle and Swisher, 1997; Harris, 1985; Nelson and Lalemi, 1991; Preston, 1991; Suina and Smolkin, 1994; Swisher and Deyhle, 1987; Tempest, 1998; Wax et al., 1989). Cooperative learning and experienced-based learning activities have been seen as appropriate for AI-AN children, as have the incorporation of other traditions, such as storytelling and culturally relevant materials (Preston, 1991).
- Caution should be used in generalizing findings about characteristics to groups of children because that could result in stereotypes, discrimination, or erroneous explanations about school failure (Swisher, 1991).

Sources: ***Head Start Research: A Summary of Research and Publications on Early Childhood for American Indian and Alaska Native Children***, March 2003. Contract

from HHS/ACF/ACYF/HSB to ORC Macro, Calverton, MD, prepared by: Ellen L. Marks, Melinda K. Moyer, Michelle Roche and Elliott T. Graham. ***National Indian Head Start Directors Association American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start 2002-2003 Advocacy Agenda***, August 2001. Compilation of input from participants of the 2001 NIHSDA Training Conference.